

Dr. J. T. L. Left, William Howard

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Address before the
Washington Association
of New Jersey

Philadelphia
1915

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Address
by
WILLIAM HOWARD TAFT

**Before the Washington Association of New Jersey,
at Morristown, New Jersey, Monday,
February 22nd, 1915**

Sent out with the Compliments of George H. Paine, Philadelphia, Pa.

By transfer
The White House.-

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ADDRESS OF WILLIAM H. TAFT BEFORE
THE WASHINGTON ASSOCIATION OF NEW
JERSEY, AT MORRISTOWN, NEW JERSEY,
FEBRUARY 22, 1915.

Gentlemen of the Washington Association of New Jersey:

Washington's life and service related to many phases and problems in our national life, and his views, set forth in his correspondence, in his messages, and expressed in his executive acts, are broad and comprehensive. No issue or problem of national importance presses on a birthday of his, the solution of which may not be greatly aided by a recurrence to principles which he practiced and sought to inculcate in his fellow countrymen.

I do not intend today to dwell on the indispensable character of the service that he rendered to the country in winning Independence and in the framing and ratification of the Constitution. Under the inspiration of these historic surroundings where Washington lived many trying days and weeks and months of the Revolutionary struggle, you have familiarized yourselves with his life. In this presence, it would be a work of supererogation for any one, though much more a student of his career than I am, to review it.

After Independence was won and the Constitution was adopted, there still remained to this country a fateful period in which the Ship of State was to be launched, national sovereignty was to be enforced, and that Independence, which had been nominally granted and secured, was to be in fact established among the nations of the world.

I pass by the achievement of national organization under the guidance of Washington, assisted by the genius of Hamilton and Madison, before Jefferson entered the Cabinet. I do not discuss the birth of national credit under the financial measures pressed upon Congress by Hamilton and secured ultimately through the co-operation of Jefferson.

This 183rd anniversary of Washington's birth, in view of the present critical condition in our International Relations, should bring to our minds the third great achievement of his Presidential term, the maintenance of a policy of neutrality through a general European War. He insisted upon it as necessary before he became President; he maintained it throughout his official life as President against mighty odds and under conditions that tried his soul, and in his Farewell Address, he restated it and reinforced it as a legacy to the American people.

He began his first Administration at the time of the outbreak of the French Revolution. The progress of that great popular uprising, with all its excesses and the wars that grew out of it, was reflected in American politics of that day in a way that makes the currents in our popular opinion today due to the existing European War, seem negligible. France had been our friend, when we needed a friend, in the Revolutionary War. The French people were engaged in destroying the divine right of kings, and substituting therefor popular rule. They were encountering monarchical intervention to restore the old system. Nothing was better calculated to awaken the patriotic and friendly sympathy of this country, in whose memory the struggles of the Revolution were still fresh. The appeals which the French Republic, through the Ministers which it had sent here, Genet, Fauchet and Adet, fell upon grateful and responsive hearts and aroused an anxiety to help this struggle of our friend for liberty in Europe. Moreover, our obligations to France under the Treaty of 1778 seemed to require us to favor her as a belligerent in her war with England. The intriguing and plotting of the French Ministers to use the United States as a basis of operations against England greatly complicated the problem which Washington had to face in avoiding an English war. Moreover, the utter fatuousness of much of the English policy in seizing American merchantmen without warning and in stirring up Indian outrages against our Western settlers

roused American feeling against that country to the highest pitch.

In the teeth of marked British insolence, Washington sent Jay to England to make the treaty which bore his name. The flamboyant blundering and partisanship of Monroe as Minister to France, while the treaty was being negotiated in England, leading to his recall, and the apparent desertion of Washington by Federalists as well as Republicans when he signed the treaty, and the subsequent change of public opinion when the foreign French intrigue against the treaty became known, and when, in spite of its many defects, the benefits of the treaty were seen by the country, constitute a train of events in the successful maintenance of neutrality which proves it to be more completely and exclusively Washington's own, and more fully due to his personal foresight, his personal courage and his personal influence than any other achievement of his career.

In the Revolutionary War, of course he was the leader, but there were many others who shared with him the responsibility. In the framing of the Constitution, in the organization of our government, and in our financial policy, Hamilton and Madison and others played a large part. Washington sat as an arbitrator in many of these issues which were presented to him in the opposing arguments of his associates. As Jefferson said:

“During the administration of our first President, his Cabinet of four members was equally divided by as marked an opposition of principle as monarchism and republicanism could bring into conflict. Had that Cabinet been a (French) directory, like positive and negative quantities in algebra, the opposing wills would have balanced each other and produced a state of absolute inaction. But the President heard with calmness the opinion and reasons of each, decided the course to be pursued, and kept the government steadily in it, unaffected by the agitation. The public knew well the

dissensions of the Cabinet, but never had an uneasy thought on their account, because they knew also they had provided a regulating power which would keep the machine in steady movement."

But the policy of Neutrality was Washington's alone. He initiated it. He enforced it. He bequeathed it to his countrymen. Before he had been chosen President he wrote as follows:

"I hope the United States of America will be able to keep disengaged from the labyrinth of European politics and wars; and that before long they will, by the adoption of a good national government, have become respectable in the eyes of the world. . . . It should be the policy of the United States to administer to their wants without being engaged in their quarrels."

A year after he went into the Presidency he wrote to Lafayette that we were:

"Gradually recovering from the distresses in which the war left us, patiently advancing in our task of civil government, unentangled in the crooked politics of Europe."

In March, 1793, Washington said:

"All our late accounts from Europe hold up the expectation of a general war in that quarter. For the sake of humanity, I hope that such an event will not take place. But if it should, I trust that we shall have too just a sense of our own interest to originate any cause that may involve us in it."

Again on March 12, 1793, he wrote to Jefferson:

"War having actually commenced between France and Great Britain, it behooves the government of this country to use every means in its power to prevent the

citizens thereof from embroiling us with either of those powers, by endeavoring to maintain a strict neutrality. I therefore require that you will give the subject mature consideration, that such measures as shall be deemed most likely to effect this desirable purpose may be adopted without delay."

On the 2nd of April, 1793, he issued a proclamation of neutrality. It must be realized too that this proclamation of neutrality was very difficult to reconcile with the engagements of the United States under the treaty of France made during the Revolutionary War, and it was possible only to escape them on the plea that they were not binding on the United States in the case of an offensive war such as France was waging against England. Finally, after his course of neutrality had been vindicated and he came to lay his office down, he appealed to the American people not to depart from it. He said in his Farewell Address:

"The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign Nations, is, in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connexion as possible. So far as we have already formed engagements, let them be fulfilled with perfect good faith. Here let us stop.

"Europe has a set of primary interests, which to us have none, or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns. Hence therefore it must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves, by artificial ties in the ordinary vicissitudes of her politics, or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships, or enmities.

"Our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course.

"Why forego the advantages of so peculiar a situation? Why quit our own to stand upon foreign

ground? Why, by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalry, interest, humour, or caprice?"

It seems to me that this is a good text from which to preach a sermon and draw a lesson on this Washington's birthday, when most of the great powers of Europe are again at war.

We have among our citizens many who look back to the country of one or another of the belligerents as their native land. The natural result has followed that the bitterness of the contest is reflected in the conflicting sympathies of our people. The newspapers of no other country have been as full of details of the war and of the circumstances leading to it as our own press. This has stimulated public interest and created partisans who attack President Wilson because he has been faithfully following the example set, and the admonitions given, by our first President. No better evidence of this could be had than that, from time to time, first one side and then the other criticises the Administration for its partiality, its lame acquiescence, or its unfair protests. So extreme have some of these partisans become that they propose to organize a political party and take political action, to be based on issues arising out of the present war; to ignore altogether the questions germane to American domestic politics, and to visit all candidates in future elections who do not subscribe to their factional international views, with political punishment. I am far from saying that an unwise or an unpatriotic course in our foreign relations may not justify criticism of an administration and may not require its condemnation at the appropriate election, but in such a case the reasons must be found in injury to the interests of the United States, and not in the merits of the issues being fought out by European nations in an European arena.

I was asked in Canada recently whether the war would affect our politics, so as to divide parties on European lines. I answered unhesitatingly in the negative. I said that to inject European issues into American politics had uniformly meant the defeat of those who attempted it. There is no better proof of this than the revulsion of feeling against the Republican party in the latter part of Washington's second term, when the people suspected it of making the cause of the French Revolution more important than the safety and prosperity of the United States. The country rallied to Washington's support and his maintenance of American interests only a short time after he had signed the most unpopular treaty ever negotiated in our history.

Legislation is pressed to forbid the sale of arms and ammunition by our merchants in trade to belligerents. It happens that one party to the war is fully prepared with ammunition and arms. It happens that the other party is not. It happens that the party which is prepared with ammunition and arms is excluded from the seas by the navies of their opponents. It happens therefore that the only sale of ammunition and arms that can take place is to one side. Therefore it is said that as the side to which we are selling arms and ammunition is more or less dependent on our sales, we should place an embargo on that trade, force that side to peace, and bring the war to an end. It has always been a rule of international law that neutral countries may sell arms and ammunition to either belligerent but that such articles are absolute contraband and liable to confiscation on board a neutral vessel. We have proceeded on this assumption and our manufacturers have sold arms and ammunition to those belligerents who would buy. We do not discriminate between the belligerents in the matter of furnishing war material. It is only that the fortune of war and the circumstances, over which we have no control, prevent one side from purchasing in our markets which are open to all who can reach them. Nor is it possible to see

why the doing of that which neutrals in all wars have been permitted to do should be made unneutral by such circumstances. The change of the well-established rule, however, where such a change would inure only to the benefit of one of the parties might well be regarded as unneutral, as has been pointed out by the President. Neutrality leagues, therefore, that are organized to press legislation in the nature of an embargo on the sale of arms and ammunition do not seem to be rightly named.

But my chief objection to giving up the lawful and usual course of a neutral to sell arms and ammunition to belligerents is based on the highest National interest. We are a country which is never likely to be fully prepared for war. We must have the means of preparing as rapidly as possible after war is imminent and inevitable. We would be most foolish to adopt a policy of refusing to sell arms and ammunition to belligerent powers which if it was pursued against us when we were driven into war, would leave us helpless. In our Spanish War we were obliged to purchase ships and other equipments for war from foreign countries, and in any future war, we would be in the same position.

More than this, if we were to place an embargo on the sale of arms and ammunition to belligerents, we would discourage the industry in this country and reduce substantially our possible domestic means of preparing for future wars. It has long been the policy and the wise policy of the War Department not to be dependent for its supplies on government factories alone, but to encourage private enterprise in this line of manufacture, in order that, should national exigency arise, we could depend on aid from private sources. To deny to the owners of such investments the opportunities of trade with belligerents would be to discourage them and make our preparedness to resist unjust aggression even less than it now is.

Finally, the general adoption of a course by neutrals not to sell arms to the belligerents in a war, would greatly

stimulate the tendency to increase armaments in time of peace to be ready for war. Such a stimulus to greater armaments we should all deplore, because of their burden upon the peoples of the countries affected, and because of the temptation to war involved in their maintenance.

Another criticism against the Administration comes not only from those whose predilections are based on their European origin, but also from native Americans who are aroused by what they conceive to be the possible evil world consequences of this war and the merits of its issues. They complain of the Administration because it did not protest against every violation of international law committed by one set of the belligerents against the other. This view was made to depend at first upon what was thought to be a treaty obligation on the part of the United States to protest, growing out of the provisions of The Hague treaties, to which most of the belligerents together with the United States have been signatories. Further examination, I think, showed that most of these treaties were by their own terms inoperative, because they had not been signed by all the belligerents. While the people of the United States might well maintain the wisdom and righteousness of such provisions, or deplore their violation, their government was not under any treaty obligation to take part in the controversy, to express an opinion, or to register a protest.

It must be noted that in every war one side must be wrong, and frequently both sides are wrong. Frequently both sides violate international law and the laws of war against each other. It is most difficult for a neutral to learn all the facts in such a way as to reach a safe and certain judgment on the merits. Moreover, even if this is possible, it has been the policy of our government since its establishment to decline to enter the European arena of war in any capacity, and our obligation to take sides in a European war and enter a protest must be exceedingly clear before we should permit ourselves to do so. When an issue made is being fought by millions of

men on one side and by millions of men on another, a neutral nation which fails to protest against violations of the laws of war as between belligerents cannot be said to acquiesce in those violations or to recognize them in any way as a precedent which will embarrass it. We must realize that in a controversy like this, where the whole life-blood of each contestant is being poured out, and in which its very existence as a nation is at stake, protests like those proposed in respect of issues in which a neutral is not directly interested, may well seem to the highly sensitive peoples engaged a formal declaration of sympathy in the war with one side or the other. This must inevitably and materially injure our attitude of neutrality, without accomplishing any good. Therefore, while I sympathize with the Belgians in this war, whose country, without any fault of theirs, has been made its bloody center, I approve and commend to the full the attitude of President Wilson in declining to consider the evidence brought before him in respect to alleged atrocities in Belgium, and to express an opinion on the issues presented. A similar decision with respect to the application of the German Government to have him investigate the evidence of the use of dum dum bullets was equally sound. We are not sitting as judges of issues between countries in Europe in this great war. We are seeking to maintain strict neutrality, and until our decision is invoked, with an agreement to abide by our judgment, and recommendation for settlement, we need not embroil ourselves by official expressions of criticism or approval of the acts of the participants in the war. This is not only the wisest course for us to pursue in maintaining an attitude that may give us influence in promoting mediation when mediation is possible, but it will help us to avoid being drawn into the war.

It is said that we show ourselves utterly selfish and commercial when we refuse to protest against a breach of the laws of war by one belligerent against another, and yet register protest against the violation of our neutral trade rights. Thus our critics say we exalt our pockets above

principle. This is a confusion of ideas. When the action of a belligerent directly affects our commercial interests, then we must protest or acquiesce in the wrong. When the wrong is not committed against us, but against a European nation in a European quarrel, absence of protest by us is not acquiescence by us, but only consistent maintenance of our National Policy to avoid European quarrels. Not only was this the rule laid down by Washington, but it has found authoritative expression in the reservation made in the treaty between the United States, Germany, Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Spain, France, Great Britain, Italy, The Netherlands, Portugal, Russia and Sweden known as the Treaty of Algeciras, proclaimed January 22, 1907. The reservation was as follows:

“As a part of this act of ratification, the Senate understands that the participation of the United States in the Algeciras Conference, and in the formulation and adoption of the General Act and Protocol which resulted therefrom, was with the sole purpose of preserving and increasing its commerce in Morocco, the protection as to life, liberty and property of its citizens residing or traveling therein, and of aiding by its friendly offices and efforts in removing friction and controversy which seemed to menace the peace between the powers signatory with the United States to the treaty of 1880, all of which are on terms of amity with this government; and without purpose to depart from the traditional American foreign policy which forbids participation by the United States in the settlement of political questions which are entirely European in their scope.”

It is noteworthy that this reservation was proposed by the Senate and approved and signed by President Roosevelt in the same years in which the Hague Treaties were signed. It throws light on the attitude we proposed to take in respect of breaches of those treaties committed by one European nation against another.

Our interest in the present war, therefore, under the conditions that exist, should be limited as set forth in this reservation, to preserving and increasing the commerce of the United States with the belligerents, to the protection as to life, liberty and property of our citizens residing or traveling in their countries, and to the aiding by our friendly offices and efforts in bringing those countries to peace.

Our efforts for peace have been made as complete as possible, for the President has already tendered his good offices by way of mediation between the powers, and they have not been accepted.

In preserving the commerce of the United States with the belligerents, however, we are face to face with a crisis. We are threatened with a serious invasion of our rights as neutrals in trading with the belligerent countries. What certainly is an innovation upon previous rules in respect to neutral commerce and contraband of war has been initiated by belligerents of both sides. The planting of mines in the open sea and the use of submarines to send neutral vessels to the bottom without inquiry as to their neutrality when found in a so-called war zone of the open sea, are all of them a variation from the rules of international law governing the action of belligerents towards neutral trade. When their violation results in the destruction of the lives of American citizens, or of American property, a grave issue will arise as to what the duty of this government is. The responsibility of the President and Congress in meeting the critical issue thus presented in maintaining our national rights, and our national honor on the one hand, with due regard to the awful consequences to our 90,000,000 of people, of engaging in this horrible world war, on the other, will be very great. It involves on their part a judgment so momentous in its consequences that we should earnestly pray that the necessity for it may be averted. If, however, the occasion arises, we can be confident that those in authority will be actuated by the highest patriotic motives and by the

deepest concern for our national welfare. We must not allow our pride or momentary passion to influence our judgment. We must exercise the deliberation that the fateful consequences in the loss of our best blood and enormous waste of treasure would necessarily impose upon us. We must allow no jingo spirit to prevail. We must abide the judgment of those to whom we have entrusted the authority, and when the President shall act, we must stand by him to the end. In this determination we may be sure that all will join, no matter what their previous views, no matter what their European origin. All will forget their differences in self-sacrificing loyalty to our common flag and our common country.

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